

VZCZCXRO6713  
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV  
DE RUEHLB #1406/01 2561504  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 131504Z SEP 07  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9366  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1552  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001406

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/07/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MUSLIM RELIGIOUS LEADERS PRESS FOR  
ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)  
) .

SUMMARY

1. (C) Sheikh Salim Soussan, the Sunni Mufti of Sidon, and Sayyed Ali al-Amin, the independent minded Shi'a Mufti of Tyre, both conveyed messages of goodwill toward the US in September 10 meetings with Embassy staff. However, while Soussan focused on the volatile national and regional political situation, al-Amin was chiefly concerned with what he viewed as the GOL's chronically lackadaisical attitude in dealing with the deprived communities of southern Lebanon, which had led to Hizballah taking credit for most aid efforts, particularly those undertaken after the July 2006 war. Gently reproachful of US Middle East policy, Soussan delivered a summary of the region's woes, which he believes are exacerbated by the U.S. bias in favor of Israel. Al-Amin gave an animated account of GOL indifference to the south's needs, which he argued have become more pressing since the end of the July 2006 war. End summary.

LEBANON ENTANGLED IN REGIONAL DILEMMAS

2. (C) On September 10, Pol/Econ Chief, PolOff, and FSN Political Advisor met with Soussan and al-Amin in their respective offices in Sidon and Tyre. As the acting Mufti of Sidon, the only Sunni town in south Lebanon, Soussan noted that Sunni and Shi'a authorities in the area meet regularly to avoid possible conflict between the two sects. While praising Lebanon for being the only truly democratic country in the region, Soussan lamented Lebanon's vulnerability in the face of the explosive issues plaguing the Middle East, among them Iraq, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Syria and the Special Tribunal, and Iran's nuclear program. The "Resistance" (Hizballah), and Lebanon's Palestinian camps further complicate matters, he argued, since the stakes for every group in Lebanon actually reflect the interests of various foreign powers.

3. (C) When asked about Sunni-Shi'a relations, Soussan smiled, saying that Sunni-Shi'a conflict has existed since the time of the Prophet. Although lines of communication between him and Shi'a clerics were always open, "tension was dormant, but could always arise."

MUSLIMS' PROBLEM WITH THE US

14. (C) Expressing sincere sympathy to the American people for the 9/11 tragedy, Soussan stressed that Islam forbids violence, and that Islam had been distorted and used as a pretext. According to Soussan, hostility toward the US stems from the US bias in favor of Israel. People like the US, but demand that it be balanced in its relationships. Soussan added that "Zionist extremists" impose their views on the Jews just as Muslim extremists do to their coreligionists. Soussan, who has visited the US, spoke admiringly of how carefree people seemed, and that he could not tell the difference between rich and poor. (Note: Soussan's daughter is married to an American and lives in Texas.)

#### AL-AMIN DEPLORES GOL NEGLECT OF SOUTH

-----

15. (C) The maverick al-Amin continues to pay a price for his past criticism of Hizballah and Amal. His calls for Shi'a loyalty to the state of Lebanon and the disarmament of Hizballah have caused him to lose significant Shi'a support. However, in the meeting with Embassy staff, al-Amin did not portray Hizballah as a villain, but merely as a clever exploiter of the GOL's indifference and incompetence. He stressed that people did not flock to Hizballah because of its ideology, but because of the assistance it provides. Ironically, some of that assistance is provided by the GOL, but Hizballah gets the credit, because the GOL channels it through Hizballah and Amal. For example, he said (in a claim we will discuss with Minister Nayla Mouawad) that the Ministry of Social Affairs spends millions of Lebanese pounds on institutions run by Hizballah.

16. (C) Al-Amin also decried the absence of visits to the south by even mid-level GOL officials, not to mention ministerial level visits. He described his own situation as

BEIRUT 00001406 002 OF 003

that of "being isolated in the middle of a sea," since even local authorities, intimidated by Hizballah, avoid coming to see him. Al-Amin is convinced that the "silent majority" of Shi'a want to be independent of Hizballah and Amal, but the GOL does not have a strategy to assist them. He also noted that he had recently asked the French UNIFIL representative why the French government had limited Shi'a participation in the St. Cloud talks to Hizballah and Amal, but did not say whether he had gotten a satisfactory reply.

#### TOPICS OF THE DAY: SECURITY AND ELECTIONS

-----

17. (C) Al-Amin portrayed the precarious security situation in the south as one of "mutual consent," with both the GOL and Hizballah tolerating each other. Al-Amin called for strengthening the Lebanese army, since the concept of the unified state rested on a strong and effective army. In turn, UNIFIL should work to strengthen the state. On the other hand, al-Amin did not think UNIFIL could prevent further conflict between Hizballah and Israel, claiming -- contrary to UNIFIL's reports -- there were areas of the south off-limits to UNIFIL forces. Al-Amin also noted that Hizballah and Amal have even infiltrated UNIFIL by way of employment. Ominously, al-Amin expressed fear of a regional war ignited by what Iran and Syria are doing. Nevertheless, he emphasized that Iranian dominance is rejected by Arab Shi'a.

18. (C) Al-Amin dismissed Parliament Speaker Berri's offer to give up the opposition's insistence on a national unity government in return for March 14 agreeing to the principle of a two-thirds quorum as a ruse. In effect, Berri offered March 14 something he had never had to give. According to al-Amin, a two-thirds quorum and calling for consensus would not empower a new president; rather, the quorum would be an obstacle. Al-Amin said it would be better to have a strong president, who is capable of imposing the rule of law, as the army had in Nahr al-Barid. As for the selection of a

presidential candidate, Al-Amin believes that Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, as a respected national figure, could wield significant influence not just on Christians, but on all Lebanese.

COMMENT

19. (C) It is encouraging news that Ali al-Amin agreed to see us: a year ago, after the Hizballah-Israel war, he became an outspoken critic of Hizballah, whose followers then tried to brand him as a heretic. At that point, not wanting to give Hizballah any material with which to brand him an American spy, al-Amin politely declined our requests to meet. Now, after a year of public skepticism about Hizballah -- and after pointedly visiting Siniora in the Grand Serail while Hizballah demonstrators protested outside -- he feels secure enough to receive us. We will find opportunities to continue to engage him and others like him in the Shia community.

110. (C) Al-Amin's criticisms of government neglect, like his complaints about Hizballah, are based in fact. In a deal that long precedes the Siniora cabinet, official assistance to the south -- which is in fact more generous than to some other parts of the country, like the far north -- has long been channeled through the Council for the South, an organization controlled by Nabih Berri. At the conclusion of last summer's war, Siniora's cabinet (then still united) again made the decision to use the Council for the South as the gatekeeper of reconstruction funds. This was done at the insistence of Berri and the Shia ministers, who threatened a walk-out of the Siniora cabinet if the Council for the South was not given a prominent role. So the Council, and Berri, once again got credit for the money that was disbursed. (There was, however, one importance difference: unlike in the past, the Council after last summer did not hold the money but, instead, merely authorized the expenditure to private homeowners to pay for damages. Siniora believes that this limited the skimming that is allegedly a regular Berri practice. But of course corruption comes in many forms. We would not be surprised if individual recipients had to pay "finder's fees" to the Council or hire certain contractors for the work on their damaged homes.)

111. (C) Ali al-Amin is right in that it would have been better for the government, not a Berri institution, to be

BEIRUT 00001406 003 OF 003

seen as the benefactor to victims of last summer's war. But, politically, Siniora's cabinet, beleaguered at the time under what seemed to be a never-ending Israeli air and sea embargo, was not about to pick a fight with the Berri-Hizballah ministers, who nonetheless tendered their resignations about ten weeks later. We hope that Siniora and his colleagues have learned their lesson about Berri's trustworthiness. Yet we worry that they will continue to pander to Berri, in the belief that he might bring Hizballah along, rather than actively support independent Shia like al-Amin. If a new president is elected through complicity with Berri, then that new president will also have an interest in sustaining the flawed status quo that puts figures like al-Amin at a disadvantage.

112. (C) As for al-Amin's criticism that ministers have not visited the south, we are more sympathetic with the security worries of Siniora et al. Minister Pierre Gemayel was assassinated in a Christian area full of supporters from his Kataib party. It is hard to imagine any minister in the current cabinet, demonized by Hizballah, feeling it worth the risk to go to "enemy territory," a part of the country dominated by Hizballah. Statements from pro-Syrian figures like Suleiman Franjeh that Siniora and Marwan Hamadeh are plotting Hassan Nasrallah's assassination are a provocation for murder, and murder would be easier to carry out and cover up in the south. While we wish that the government services

were more obvious in the south, we unfortunately don't think it wise for Siniora et al. themselves to be present there at the moment.

FELTMAN